

THE HIDDEN AGONY OF WOODROW WILSON

To the remarkable list of modern American presidents whose characters were molded by a struggle against illness—Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and, to an extent only recently revealed, John F. Kennedy—scholars have added the name of Woodrow Wilson. The famous Wilsonian obstinacy and tendency to impatient judgment were symptoms of a cerebrovascular disease that he carefully concealed from public view for decades before the stroke that felled him during the epic battle over the League of Nations in 1919. As the late historian Kenneth S. Lynn shows in this excerpt from his unfinished book on presidential health cover-ups, Wilson’s struggle with physical affliction may have been admirable, but its secret nature compromised Wilson’s own values—and raises the question of how different history might have been had the American public been told the truth.

BY KENNETH S. LYNN



On the presidential campaign trail in 1912, Wilson spoke at a state fair in Syracuse, New York.

In a letter of 1911 to his special lady friend, Mary Peck, Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) confessed that in his childhood he had “lived a dream life (almost too exclusively, perhaps).” Both his father and his mother had helped to enrich that life by regularly reading aloud to him from the works of Charles Dickens and Walter Scott, the collected essays of Charles Lamb, and James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*. The boy adored those books, yet he was unable to identify all the letters of the alphabet until he was nine years old, and he was 12 before he learned to read. Aside from buying him a pair of eyeglasses, which proved to be unnecessary, the senior Wilsons could think of no way to help their son—and no wonder. During the years of mounting concern about their son’s laggard literacy, they lived in a quiet southern town far removed from the nation’s centers of medical activity. They did not know that pioneer observers had recently discerned a surprising pattern: In certain cases of stroke, the victim was unable to read but retained the ability to talk.

The strokes of Wilson’s later years compel us to ask whether his helplessness as a young reader stemmed from unrecorded occurrences of the same trauma. In any case, his struggle with the disability was agonizing, and when it ended happily, he immediately discovered that he had other problems. The pace at which he was able to read, and to write accurately as well, proved to be unsatisfactorily slow. The young Wilson sought to compensate for his slowness as a reader by focusing with such intensity on whatever text lay before him that he eventually developed an almost photographic memory. At 15, he attacked his writing problem by mastering an intricate system of shorthand. A decade later, he purchased a typewriter, on which he learned to type at a furious speed despite the primitiveness of the newfangled machine. His most extraordinary exercise of self-discipline was to teach himself, during his student days at the College of New Jersey (as Princeton University was then formally known), to compose entire essays in his mind before committing them to paper.

At Princeton, too, he kept a diary, in shorthand, in which every entry concluded with the prayerful exclamation, “Thank God for health and strength.” But his health was troubled. During the year he spent at Davidson College in North Carolina before transferring to Princeton, he had come down with a bad cold that would not go away. “My darling Boy,” his alarmed mother wrote him in the spring of 1874, “I am so anxious about that cold of yours. . . . Surely you have not laid aside your winter clothing? . . . You seem depressed—but that is because you are not well.” Severe headaches bothered him at Princeton, as did worries about their meaning. At the end of his junior year, the worries crept into a brilliant essay he wrote on the British politician William Pitt (1708–78), who was known as Pitt the Elder. Wilson at 21 had already decided to have a political career someday, and in Pitt he recognized a godlike model. Energized by self-referential dreams, the essayist’s salute to the great statesman soared: “His devotion to his country’s service was as intense as it was entire; and the intellect whose every power he brought to bear upon the direction of her affairs composed its duty with a vigor commensurate with its colossal proportions. . . . [His] will was unswerving, his convictions were uncompromising, his imagination was powerful enough to invest all plans of national policy with a poetic charm.” Unfortunately, the “enormous strain” of the Seven Years’ War created circumstances that finally compelled Pitt to leave the cabinet, whereupon he was “restricken by [a] disease which . . . sapped the strength of his imperial intellect,” and “a noble statesman” collapsed into “a noble ruin.”

In the powerfully felt final sentences of a richly symbolic portrayal, a headache-wracked Princeton student came eerily close to envisioning the denouement of his own career: “Under the deepening shadow of a gathering storm we obtain a last glimpse of [him], as he stands, himself a wreck, holding up before a blind Ministry a picture of the dark ruin which was awaiting them. With some of his old haughtiness the austere old man rises to answer one who had dared to reply to him, and falls, never to rise again.”

Wilson entered law school at the University of Virginia in October 1879, and from the outset he was unhappy. His courses were “terribly boring,” and he was further discouraged by a persistent cold and recurrent digestive upsets. By the following spring, both his parents were urging him to quit the school and pursue his studies at home. Nine months later, he finally gave in to their entreaties, after having been warned by a Charlottesville doctor that if he did not receive systematic treatment for his stomach problems, he might become a chronic dyspeptic.

In the opening pages of *Little Strokes* (1960), Dr. Walter Alvarez explains why he, a gastroenterologist with 30 years’ experience in the field, was moved to write a book about neurological matters. Most of the patients he saw during his career at the Mayo Clinic had been referred to him because of their complaints about digestive or abdominal trouble. But a good many of those patients turned out to be suffering from the effects of a little stroke. Close questioning of them led Alvarez

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to realize that “the patient with a little stroke that has produced ‘a constant misery’ in his abdomen rarely thinks to tell his physician about the *sudden onset* of his trouble, with perhaps a woozy spell or a fall to the floor. . . . Left to himself, he will talk only of his stomach-ache.”

With a like single-mindedness, Woodrow Wilson spoke about his digestive distresses, but never about the circumstances in which they had begun.

After enrolling in graduate school at Johns Hopkins University in the early 1880s, Wilson again complained about gastric discomfort, headaches, and colds, as well as feelings of depression and “a haunting dread” of appendicitis. His fiancée, Ellen Axson, sympathetically remarked in a letter she wrote him two months before their wedding in June 1885 that “my poor darling’s health is not *poor* exactly,” but is definitely “not very strong.” Yet if he never failed to describe his latest woe to Ellen, he insisted that the larger truth about his health was that it

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was excellent: “You mustn’t take it so much to heart when I am sick, my little sweetheart. I’ve never been seriously ill in my life. . . . Whenever I write to you that I am unwell, I am inclined to reproach myself afterwards for having told you anything about it; and yet I tell you such things *on principle*.”

Behind all Wilson’s protestations of good health lay an unquestioning acceptance of the faith of his Presbyterian forebears, who had regarded themselves as members of a chosen people. Though God had bestowed this status upon them without reservation, the elect were required to justify it again and again, through the ceaseless performance of good works. It was a moral imperative to shrug off illnesses, first by proclaiming that they were not really serious, and then by resolutely buckling down to the task at hand. “My life would not be worth living,” Wilson told a friend in 1915, “if it was not for the driving power of religion.”

In earlier years, that power had driven him to work prodigiously hard to stock his mind and hone its edge, and the results were awesome. As a first-year graduate student at Johns Hopkins, for instance, he dominated the discussions in J. Franklin Jameson’s course in English constitutional history by dint of, as Jameson wrote in his diary, “the greatest logical skill and ability.” During the midyear exam period, moreover, Wilson astounded his fellow first-year students by beginning work on a book about the current distribution of power in the federal establishment. Nine months later, the completed manuscript of *Congressional Government* (1885) reached the desk of an editor at Houghton Mifflin.

Wilson was a popular figure from the time he arrived on the Princeton campus in the fall of 1890 as the new occupant of the chair of jurisprudence and political economy, and year after year he finished first in undergraduate rankings of favorite professors. But those ballotings left something unsaid. As a former Wilson student emphasized, “We felt we had been in the presence of a great man.” The guest lectures Wilson gave at Johns Hopkins every year likewise attracted unusually large and enthusiastic audiences, and in talks to Princeton alumni and

commencement addresses at various colleges, he added even more luster to his reputation as a riveting speaker.

Between early October 1895 and mid-January 1896, Wilson's outside obligations were exceptionally heavy. Toward the end of October, a punishing attack of gripe put him in bed for days. Three months later, at Hopkins, stomach pains and fever forced the postponement of a couple of his lectures. An old friend and teacher, Theodore Whitefield Hunt, became concerned about him. "Can we not persuade you to lessen your work?" Hunt asked in a letter. "It is clear, Professor, that you are unduly taxing your strength." The next troubling sign was the development of a nervous tic in his left upper facial muscles. "I am afraid Woodrow is going to die," his father exclaimed.

On or about May 27, 1896, Wilson felt pain in his right arm and numbness in the fingers of his right hand. These were the symptoms of a cerebrovascular accident, which apparently had been caused by an occlusion of a central branch of the left middle cerebral artery. He was 39 years old. Although the pain was acute, Wilson made only minimizing references to it. He also acquired with amazing quickness a facility in writing left-handed, and then went off, alone, on a therapeutic bicycle trip around England and Scotland, during which he averaged 33 miles a day. From Glasgow, he reported to his wife that "my arm suffers scarcely a twinge, and is a most promising patient." But this was a stretch beyond the facts. An entire year passed before he was able to write normally (and in 1904 he would again

experience sensations of weakness in his right arm).

On returning home from Britain, he was a prominent participant in the three-day celebration, in blazing October weather, of the 150th birthday of the College of New Jersey. An ovation greeted Wilson's eloquent opening-day speech, "Princeton in the Nation's Service," which contained hidden

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expressions of his optimism about himself. In the most audacious of them, Presbyterian spirit served as a cover for his defiance of the disabling power of strokes: "Your thorough Presbyterian is not subject to the ordinary laws of life, is of too stubborn a fiber, too unrelaxing a purpose, to suffer mere inconvenience to bring defeat." On the final day of the celebration, it was announced that the college was to become a university and that Princeton would be its official name.

Wilson assumed the presidency of Princeton in 1902 and enjoyed notable success for the next four years. In moves that would be widely copied, he overhauled the curriculum and organized the departments of the faculty into new disciplinary divisions. Other departures included plans for several new professional schools, steps to strengthen the science departments, the appointment of a Jew



Governor Wilson and his first wife, Ellen, in 1912.

to the faculty, and the recruitment of 40 bright young “preceptors,” as Wilson called them, to guide student reading in each department. Recognizing that most of his innovations needed financial backing from the sons of Old Nassau, he assiduously sought their generosity, in addresses to groups as far away as the Dakota frontier. The all-around brilliance of his performance attracted the attention of Colonel George Harvey of *Harper’s Weekly*, who served as a spokesman for the moneyed interests in the Democratic Party. At a dinner in Wilson’s honor at the Lotos Club in New York, Harvey rose to his feet, gazed across the roomful of fat cats before him, and asked them to consider supporting the honoree of the evening for president of the United States.

In sum, all of Wilson's ambitions were working out beautifully in these years. Then he awoke one morning in May 1906 to discover that he was blind in his left eye and that, for the third time, his right arm felt weak.

A friend accompanied Wilson to Philadelphia, where he was seen by the distinguished ophthalmologist George de Schweinitz and by the internist Alfred Stengel. Their diagnoses emphasized that Wilson's blood pressure was dangerously elevated, and Schweinitz bluntly advised the patient to give up active work. Wilson's youngest daughter, Eleanor, recalled her father's return home. All

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three daughters were in despair, but Wilson himself seemed "calm, even gay." He had been assured, after all, by Dr. Stengel that "a rest of three months will restore you completely. . . . You have doubtless done too much in the last few years." Nevertheless, it's likely that, beneath the brave front Wilson presented to his family, the cumulative weight of all his medical troubles, climaxing

in the horror of a retinal hemorrhage, had engendered a fear in him that he might not have long to live.

His wife wavered between hope that the illness had been caught in time and an overriding gloom. "I know now more exactly what is threatening Woodrow," Ellen wrote a favorite cousin. "It is hardening of the arteries, due to prolonged pressure on brain and nerves. He has lived too tensely. It is, of course, the thing that killed his father [in 1903]; as a rule it is the result of old age. . . . It is an awful thing—a dying by inches, and incurable."

In compliance with Stengel's advice that he should rest for three months, Wilson took his family off to England, where they settled for the summer in a cottage in the Lake District. To his great relief, an ophthalmologist in Edinburgh informed him in August that although his eye had been permanently damaged, he would still be able to read with it, and a general practitioner concluded after taking his blood pressure that it would be better for him to "go back to (moderate) work than not to go." Upon resuming his responsibilities at Princeton, he streamlined his appointment schedule, acquired new secretarial help, and vowed to rest in the afternoons and take periodic vacations.

But despite the gestures he made toward reducing his level of stress, he could not control the irritability, impatience, and surges of ruthlessness that were the temporary legacies of his latest illness, as they would be of other maladies in years to come. In the fall of 1906 he set out, with fierce determination, to impose new plans upon Princeton, against certain opposition. He did not realize that his opponents would include himself.

Andrew West, the dean of the embryonic graduate school, wanted its buildings located on a beautiful piece of property outside town, rather than in the heart of the university, where Wilson passionately believed the school belonged. While this disagreement was simmering, open warfare broke out between the

two in spring 1907 with the public disclosure of Wilson's so-called quad plan. Wilson regarded the socially selective eating clubs for upperclassmen as no less divisive in their effect than fraternities were on other campuses, and he was intent on abolishing them. Without any of the careful preparatory talks with key members of the faculty and prominent alumni that had prefaced his major reform efforts in the past, he went directly to the board of trustees in December 1906 and proposed an immediate redesign of the entire social structure of undergraduate life, through the erection of residential quadrangles for the students, each with its own dining hall. Although some members of the board had misgivings about the expense of such a grand project, the prevailing reaction was favorable. Wilson was named the chairman of a committee to examine the quad plan in detail and report back to the board with a recommendation.

In the succeeding weeks, Wilson's family found him out of sorts, despite Ellen's efforts to keep her husband calm by agreeing with him about everything. Even when he announced his intention to take a Bermuda vacation by himself, she did not object. One of the letters he sent her from the island was an apology. He had become so absorbed in his career, he said, that he had taken her for granted as a part of his own individuality: "I cannot in any other way account for the suffering I cause you." With that statement he foreshadowed the hypocrisy of his political years, for if he had been forthright with Ellen, he would have spoken of the state of his health, which she feared he was endangering with his implacable ambitions.

Within days of mailing the letter, he gave Ellen cause for a different sort of suffering. He had made a new acquaintance, Mary Allen Hulbert Peck, a sophisticated, musically talented, unhappily married woman six years his junior who had rented, as was her annual practice, one of Bermuda's most historic houses. Almost immediately, her talks with Wilson assumed a confidential tone. She told him about her unhappy marriage, he comforted her, and she, unlike the anxious Ellen, showed enthusiasm for his political aspirations. After returning to Princeton, he sent her several letters in quick succession, along with a collection of his essays. She wrote back, although apparently she did not read the essays. But that hardly mattered. The important thing was the undercurrent of hope in their correspondence that they would see each other again.

In spring 1907, Wilson's committee submitted a predictably favorable report on the quad plan to the Princeton trustees, and the board duly adopted it. An announcement of the action appeared shortly afterward in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, and there was an immediate outcry on all sides. Students who loved the luxurious amenities of the eating clubs were irate. Professor Henry van Dyke of the English Department feared that the costs involved in building the quads would prevent the construction of the graduate school. Moved by the same fear, Dean West informed Wilson in an acid letter that "if the spirit of Princeton is to be killed, I have little interest in the details

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of the funeral,” and he at once began to fan the anger of other dissenters.

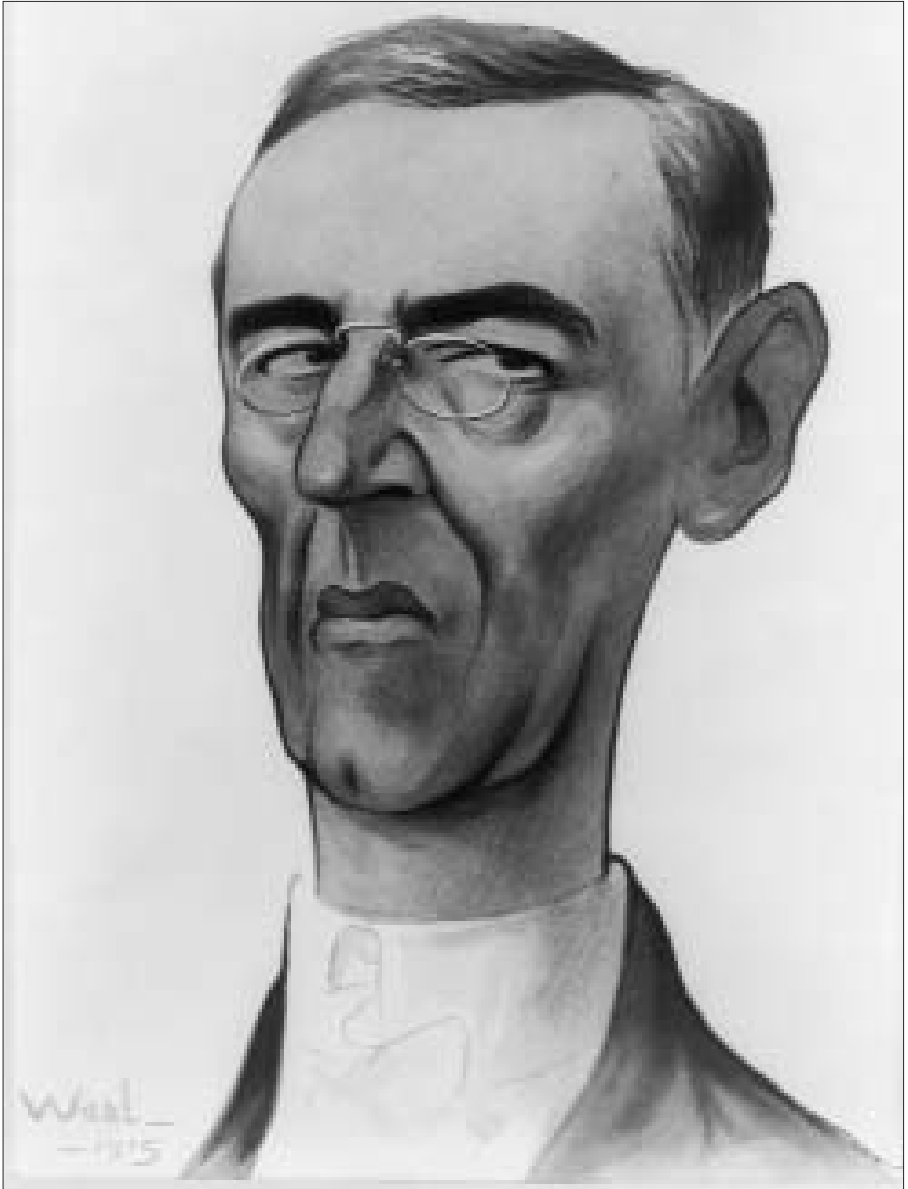
According to Ellen Wilson, the hostility directed at her husband “disheartened” him, but when friends suggested that he meet his critics’ objections halfway, his bristling rejection of their advice came close to discourtesy. “The Truth is no invalid!” he burst out, a curious phrase rooted perhaps in apprehension of the sickly fate that someday might be his. Yet at a meeting of the faculty the following September, he made a spectacularly persuasive speech that carried the day for the quad plan by a vote of 80 to 23. The opposition of the alumni did not abate, however, and, in the face of it, the board withdrew its approval of the plan on October 17.

To sweeten the pill for Wilson, who felt betrayed and was threatening to resign, the board gave him permission to keep on speaking about the controversy. Wilson seized on this palliative as an opportunity to take his case directly to the country—just as he would in his battle with the Senate over the League of Nations in 1919. Had Wilson mounted a campaign to elicit suggestions from alumni and students as to how the eating clubs might be reformed rather than eliminated, he would have damped down the discontent of both groups, healed the split in the faculty, and regained the support of the board. But ruthlessness ruled his mind and precluded any possibility of compromise. That, too, was prophetic of 1919, as was the stroke he suffered in November 1907 that wrote *finis* to his dreams of a come-from-behind win.

The fingers on his right hand became numb, his right arm was weak, and once again he could not write normally. That he felt well enough by December to show up for work was a measure of the stroke’s limited significance—and of the power of his will. Still and all, he had received a sobering reminder of his neurological vulnerability, and it was imperative, he and Ellen agreed, that he take another extended vacation by himself.

The first weeks of 1908 found the convalescent in Bermuda in pursuit of Mary Peck. With utter disregard for rumormongers in the island’s high society, he accompanied her to tea dances and dinner parties and on long walks à deux along the splendid beaches, during which they occasionally paused so that he could read her his favorite poems in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. By the first of February, he was referring to her as “My precious one, my beloved Mary.” But the lift she gave his spirits did not last. Six months later, two attacks of neuritis, as he insisted on labeling them, reawakened the ache in his right arm. Through the rest of the year and into 1909, he felt exhausted and defeated. He had lost friends on the faculty, his relations with board members had deteriorated, and his appearances before alumni groups left him aware all too often of their withheld sympathy. In a letter to Peck, he expressed a gathering resentment of “restless, rich, empty-headed people.” “They and their kind,” he said bitterly, “are the worst enemies of Princeton, and create for me the tasks which are likely to wear my life out.”

On May 10, 1909, he received the bad news that Andrew West had wangled a gift of \$500,000 from the soap company tycoon William O. Procter for the construction of a graduate school, and had further persuaded him to specify that the school’s location be off campus. These Machiavellian maneuvers by the dean



A 1915 caricature suggests that Wilson's reputation for stubborn self-righteousness preceded him in the bitter struggle over American membership in the League of Nations.

made the president of the university look inept, and Wilson rushed to protect his reputation by denouncing West as a dilettante who placed country club values above the integrity of the university. For an entire year, the battle between the two men raged, tearing apart the faculty and driving Procter to the point of withdrawing his gift. "I dream of endless debates and slanders, sessions of hostile trustees, of futile anger and distressing misunderstandings," Wilson wrote Mary Peck in February 1910. Such was his demoralization that he sought out his married confidant in her New York apartment. "In the contemptible error and madness of a few months," they descended into a "folly" that left him "stained and unworthy" of honorable love, as Wilson would later confess to Edith Bolling Galt, who became his wife after Ellen's death.

On May 18, 1910, a date Wilson would never forget, Isaac C. Wyman of Massachusetts died, leaving his entire estate—of \$8 million, it was estimated—to Princeton, and naming West as executor. The wily dean had won. He would get the graduate school he wanted and in the place he wanted it. Wilson had no choice but to resign.

Yet in the very process of losing, he came across as a man with a future in politics.

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During a much-talked-about address to Princeton alumni in April at Pittsburgh's Schenley Hotel, he had punctuated thunderous criticisms of his academic foes with bolts of political lightning. Inside the colleges, he had argued, a cadre of conspicuous men with "cruel hands" was defending the class privileges of the wealthy. But if the United States

was to avoid "the throes of revolution," its institutions, including its colleges, would have to become "saturated in the same sympathies as the common people." The conservative crowd at the Schenley was unimpressed, but the speech gained the attention of Jim Smith, a former U.S. senator from New Jersey and the dominant figure in a coalition of Democratic bosses in the northern part of the state. Smith's assessment of Wilson was that he was a national figure, and a marvelous speaker to boot, and that his potent appeal could carry him, via the governor's mansion in Trenton, all the way to the White House. Thanks to Smith's swift machinations, Wilson was able to tell a friend in June that "the question of my nomination for the governorship [in September] is the mere preliminary of a plan to nominate me in 1912 for the presidency."

Neither in his steppingstone campaign for governor in 1910 nor in his race for the presidency against William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt two years later did Wilson allude to the illnesses he had suffered, and newspapermen failed to expose them. At one point, a bad cold forced him to suspend his campaigning for a day or two, and the *Jersey City Journal* published a rumor that he had had a nervous breakdown. But that was as close as any paper came to the truth about his health. The voters had a right to know that he was "dying by inches," and by refusing to be candid with them, he betrayed his belief in George Washington's declaration that virtue or morality was the "necessary spring" of popular government. Ironically, these betrayals of principle through silence quite possibly stimulated Wilson's presentation in his speeches of an astonishingly exalted vision. The morally compromised Wilson aroused crowds with images of a purified America, in which progressive leaders were the trailblazers of mankind's moral redemption. Though admitting that political corruption had, in the past, traduced both major political parties, he insisted—on October 3, 1910, in Trenton—that most of the Democratic Party as currently constituted had been "purified by the very air that vibrates the country itself," and a month later he concluded his gubernatorial bid with the most sustained outburst of

moral rapture he had ever voiced:

Don't look forward too much. Don't look at the road ahead of you in dismay. Look at the road behind you. Don't you see how far up the hill we have come? Don't you see what those low and damp miasmatic levels were from which we have slowly led the way? Don't you see the rows of men come, not upon the lower level, but upon the upper like the rays of the rising sun?

Don't you see the light starting, and don't you see the light illumining all nations? Don't you know that you are coming more and more into the beauty of its radiance? Don't you know that the past is forever behind us, that we have passed many kinds of evils that are no longer possible, that we have achieved great ends and have almost seen the fruition of free America? Don't forget the road you have trod, but remembering it and looking back for reassurance, look forward with confidence and charity to your fellow men, one at a time as you pass them along the road, and see those who are willing to lead you and say "We do not believe you know the whole road. We know that you are no prophet; we know that you are no seer, but that you can see the end of the road from the beginning, and we believe that you know the direction and are leading us in that direction, though it costs you your life, provided it does not cost you your honor.

Though it costs you your life, provided it does not cost you your honor. There, in a nutshell, was the pathos of Wilson's situation. The cover-up of his health problems—as governor, as president—to protect his political viability cost him his honor.

In April 1913, barely a month after his inauguration, the 56-year-old president described graphically to Mary Hulbert (the former Mary Peck, now divorced from her first husband) his latest physical calamity, but he did not call it a stroke: "I have been lying in bed all day, not only because it was Sunday and I was tired and could rest, but because for the last 48 hours there has been a threat in my left shoulder of my old enemy, *neuritis*, as nasty a beast as ever attacked poor human flesh—and a mean coward, besides, for the sneak comes only when a fellow is worn out and there is no fight left in him." In Dr. Edwin A. Weinstein's *Woodrow Wilson: A Medical and Psychological Biography* (1981), the point is made that the "threat" to the left shoulder was a particularly bad sign:

This meant that the cerebral circulation [had] been impaired on the right, previously unaffected, side of the brain. This evidence of bilaterality of involvement not only increased the risk of further strokes, but also created the possibility that enduring changes in behavior, based upon insufficient blood supply and impaired oxygenation of the brain, might eventually occur.

Wilson's cousin, Helen Woodrow Bones, whom Ellen Wilson had hired as her private secretary, steered clear of saying he had suffered a stroke. But in a grim letter to her sister, she reported that his "neuritis" had left him "tired and haggard," which "frightens everybody interested in him, for nothing will cure it but rest and rest is something he can't have until Congress adjourns." A month later, lingering traces of the illness finally prompted his close adviser Colonel Edward

M. House to speak to him about conserving his strength. In a diary entry that evening, House recorded Wilson's response: "He said it looked as if the people were trying to kill him, and he spoke of the loneliness of his position, in a way that was saddening."

The newly named White House physician, Cary T. Grayson, a naval officer from Culpeper, Virginia, whose affability and fund of anecdotes endeared him to the entire Wilson family, had received a quickie medical degree from the University of the South after one year of study,

and was not all that bright in the bargain. When Wilson attributed the first illness of his presidency to neuritis, Grayson did not dispute the diagnosis. Almost a year would elapse before he realized that untreated malignant hypertension was his patient's abiding problem. What he grasped right away, however, was that the president did not handle stress very well. With the goodhearted doctor's encouragement, Wilson began to take the better part of every afternoon off. Some years before, he had discovered that he liked golf, and from mid-May to Christmas 1913 he played almost every day, weather permitting.

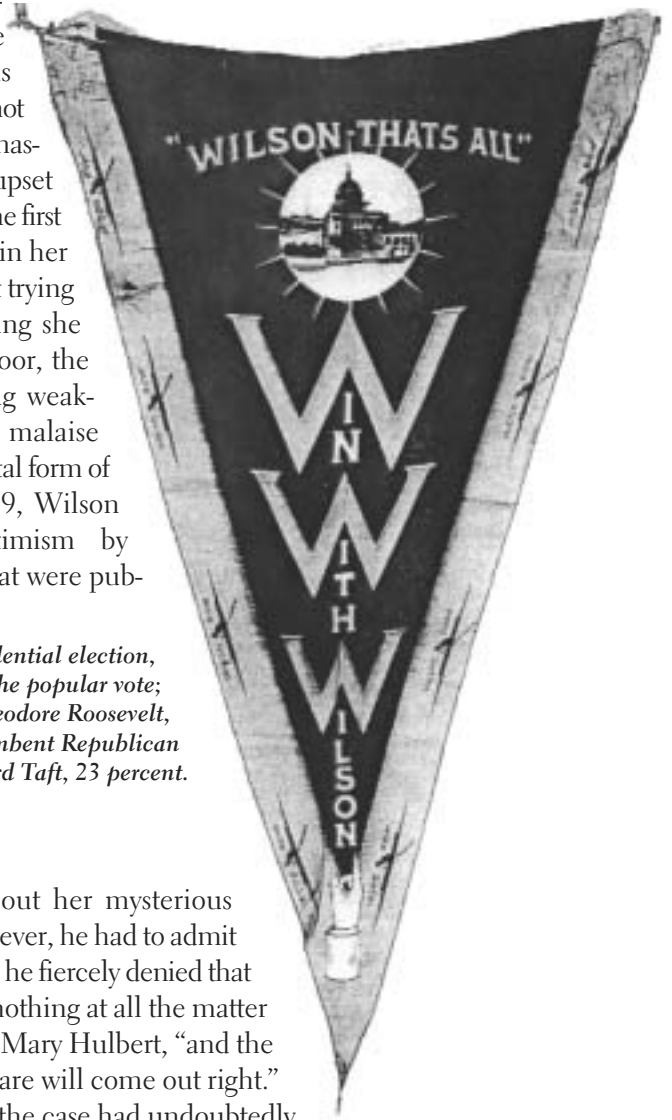
With his vigor restored and the tonic of power coursing in his veins, he again became the resplendent hero his daughter Eleanor remembered from his very first week in the White House. "Father looked extremely well and vital. . . . When I saw him come out of his study and stride down the hall toward us, I noticed that his walk had acquired more than its usual buoyancy.

His eyes were strikingly clear and bright, and there was a sort of chiseled keenness in his face. He was finer looking in those days than ever before in his life." Month after month, as 1913 wore on, his exceptionally powerful intellect and his unrelenting will made him the all but absolute master of the Washington scene. The climactic moment of his first year in office occurred on December 23, when, in an elaborate East Room ceremony, he signed into law the Federal Reserve Act.



George de Schweinitz, the doctor who had advised Wilson in 1906 to give up work, had continued to schedule appointments with him from time to time. After an examination of Wilson's eyes in March 1914, Schweinitz informed Dr. Grayson that he had found definite signs of hardening of the retinal arteries. Grayson was shaken by the news but decided not to share it with the president, inasmuch as Wilson was already upset about the first lady's health. On the first of the month, Ellen had fallen in her bedroom. Though Wilson kept trying to dissipate his anxiety by saying she had slipped on the polished floor, the grim fact was that her growing weakness, fatigue, and feelings of malaise were symptomatic of an often fatal form of kidney ailment. On March 19, Wilson went public with his optimism by denouncing the newspapers that were pub-

In the hard-fought 1912 presidential election, Wilson won 42 percent of the popular vote; Progressive Party candidate Theodore Roosevelt, 28 percent; and the incumbent Republican president, William Howard Taft, 23 percent.



lishing speculative reports about her mysterious decline. Two months later, however, he had to admit that she was very weak, although he fiercely denied that she was mortally ill. "There is nothing at all the matter with her organically," he wrote Mary Hulbert, "and the doctors assure us that all with care will come out right." But the specialists called in on the case had undoubtedly been admonished by Grayson not to alarm the president. In

July, Ellen entered the terminal stages of renal failure. Mercifully, death claimed her on August 6, two days after swift-moving armies of the German Empire invaded Belgium and Britain responded by declaring war on Germany. As Wilson looked out a window of the deathbed room across the South Lawn of the White House, he exclaimed desolately, "Oh, my God, what am I to do?"

He had betrayed Ellen sexually, yet he had always been extremely dependent upon her intelligence and devotion. In a heart-broken letter to their daughter Jessie, he affirmed that Ellen "was beyond comparison the deepest, truest, noblest lover I ever knew." That his political career, which she had feared might kill him, had led to her

demise, not his, stirred other emotions he had to reckon with. To Grayson he confessed, “I sometimes feel that the Presidency has had to be paid for with Ellen’s life; that she would be living today if we had continued in the old simple life at Princeton.” In those words was the ache of a guilty conscience. During the “simple” Princeton years, Ellen had been prone to fits of depression and self-doubt, to the point that she found it difficult to fulfill her social obligations as the wife of the university’s president. Wilson could not have helped but know that the role of first lady would make her even more insecure and unhappy.

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THE PRESIDENT.

Months passed, and still he was inconsolable. His face was gray, Colonel House said of him on November 6, and he looked “positively sick.” Twelve days later, the diarist set down an even more dramatic account of the president’s state of mind. The two men had taken a long, night-

time walk through midtown Manhattan. “When we reached home he began to tell me how lonely and sad his life was since Mrs. Wilson’s death, and he could not help wishing when we were out tonight that someone would kill him. . . . His eyes were moist when he spoke of not wanting to live any longer, and of not being fit to do the work he had in hand. He said he had himself so disciplined that he knew perfectly well that unless someone killed him, he would go on to the end doing the best he could.”

Recognizing Wilson’s desperate if unstated need to find another mate, Grayson and Helen Woodrow Bones conspired in the late winter of 1915 to introduce the president to Edith Bolling Galt, a 42-year-old widow with a comfortable income from a Washington jewelry shop left her by her late husband. A tall, lively, stylishly dressed woman with an eye-catching figure and a beautiful smile, she belonged to a distinguished Virginia family whose plantation demesne had been ruined in the Civil War. Within days of an “accidental” encounter with Wilson arranged by Bones, it became apparent that Galt had entranced him. He quickly moved from inviting her to dine at the White House and daily automobile excursions chaperoned by Bones to ever more ardent letters, a proposal of marriage on a moonlit evening in May, a formal announcement of their engagement on October 6, and a wedding in her Dupont Circle home on December 18. Colonel House and Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo, who was Wilson’s son-in-law, had urged them to postpone the wedding until after the 1916 election, out of concern that voters might be offended by the haste with which the bereaved president had become a bridegroom. (Wilson defeated his chief opponent, Charles E. Hughes, with just over 49 percent of the vote.) As both men should have known it would, the recommendation merely earned them Edith’s enmity. Indeed, she had conceived a dislike for House months before, viewing his intimacy with Wilson as a threat to her own prerogatives. She also looked down her nose at what she regarded as the coarseness of the president’s private secretary, Joseph

Tumulty, a warmly humorous Irish Catholic out of Jersey City who knew all there was to know about urban politics. Edith Galt Wilson had no use for compromise—a trait that would eventually have serious consequences for the history of the nation.



Of Wilson's role in the American entry into the Great War in April 1917, Winston Churchill wrote in *The World Crisis* (1923): "It seems no exaggeration to pronounce that the action of the United States with its repercussions on the history of the world depended, during the awful period of Armageddon, upon the workings of this man's mind and spirit to the exclusion of almost every other factor; and that he played a part in the fate of nations incomparably more direct and personal than any other man." Precisely because the decision to intervene was clearly Wilson's, it took many of his countrymen—friends and foes alike—by surprise. How could it be that this president whom they were accustomed to thinking of as a surpassingly eloquent apostle of neutrality, who had proclaimed that the nation was "too proud to fight," who had depicted himself as the mediator who could bring the conflict to an equitable close, had suddenly become an advocate of American involvement in the awful bloodletting? The choice he made in favor of war seemed out of character.

But in an important sense, Wilson was still the man nobody knew, for the public was unaware of his high blood pressure, hypertensive vascular changes, and arteriosclerosis. Nor did the White House acknowledge the disabling headaches to which he had been subject ever since the spring of 1915, when German torpedoes sank the *Lusitania* and killed 1,198 men, women, and children, 124 of whom were American citizens. The furor that ensued caused Wilson great stress. What's remarkable is that he performed effectively for as long as he did.

In August 1914, his success in transcending the despair he felt in the wake of Ellen's death lent an extra intensity to his public appeals for calmness about the outbreak of war in Europe. His pulpit message was "impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned." At the emotional peak of his most self-referential exhortation, he urged the American people to demonstrate "the fine poise of undisturbed judgment" and "the dignity of self-control" in order "to do what is necessary and disinterested and truly serviceable to the peace of the world." The outcome that Wilson desired was "a deadlock in Europe." As he told a journalist in the first Christmas season of the war, the prospects "of a just and equitable peace, and the only peace that will be lasting, will be happiest if no nation gets the decision by arms." Conversely, "the danger of an unjust peace, one that will invite further calamities, will be if some one nation or group of nations succeeds in enforcing its will upon the others."

In this same vein, on January 22, 1917, he delivered before the Senate one of the most extraordinary speeches, at once unrealistic and prescient, of the modern American presidency. The peace to be made, he declared, had to be "a peace without victory." This, he insisted, was simply hard reality. For "victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and

would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand. Only a peace between equals can last, only a peace the very principle of which is equality and a common participation in a common benefit.”

The speech was immediately attacked by the bellicose Theodore Roosevelt, who had long regarded Wilson as “yellow,” and, in the Senate, by TR’s friend

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Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts and the isolationist William E. Borah of Idaho, both of whom would be in the vanguard of the president’s opponents on the League of Nations issue two years later. Virtually all of the influential editors and publishers in both England and France, their hearts hardened by

the terrible price their nations had paid in the effort to bring Germany to its knees, were bitterly opposed as well to the idea of “peace without victory.” Though some of their counterparts in Germany spoke well of Wilson’s speech, the government revealed what it thought by resuming unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1. The last of these blows hit Wilson the hardest, of course. To Colonel House he described his eerie feeling that the sun, “after going from east to west . . . had begun to go from west to east and that he could not get his balance.”

After working far into the night on the wording of his message, he broke relations with Germany on February 3. Nevertheless, he was still looking for ways to avoid war without sacrificing American rights, and in the idea of arming American merchantmen as a means of countering the U-boat threat he found one. But a strange dilatoriness (did it reflect nervous exhaustion?) kept him from sending a memorandum on the subject to Capitol Hill until February 27, only one week before the 64th Congress was to adjourn. The House passed the armed-ship bill in nothing flat, but in the Senate, a group of isolationist progressives, who feared that shooting matches on the seas would inevitably lead to full-scale war, vowed to filibuster it to death. The previous December, Wilson had already shown the impolitic anger that constant strain induced in him, when he refused to attend a church function to which Senator Lodge had also been invited and let it be known that he found the very sight of the senator offensive. When the filibusterers triumphed, Wilson’s anger escalated into foaming rage, which he funneled into a public statement on March 4: “A little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own, have rendered the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible.” It would not cure the situation to call the 65th Congress into extraordinary session, Wilson ranted, for in the absence of consent to limit debate, the “paralysis of the Senate would remain” and the majority that favored the bill would continue to be “powerless, helpless.”

Edwin Weinstein was the first to point out that words such as “powerless,” “helpless,” and “paralysis” suggest how worn down the president was. His loss of emotional balance can be measured by his disgraceful innuendo about the un-Americanism of the filibusterers, two of whom, George Norris of Nebraska and

Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, were towering figures in the political life of the nation. That he was already feeling ill at the time of this diatribe is altogether likely, though it was not until March 7 that Dr. Grayson announced he had ordered him to bed. The president, he said, had a cold, which the press thereupon assumed he had caught during the ceremonies of his second inaugural two days earlier, while outside in the wind.

Wilson's confinement lasted nine days. When advised on March 9 that he did not need congressional authorization to arm American ships and place naval officers in command of the guns, he issued an order from his bedroom that set in motion the time-consuming mobilization. He exchanged written communications about the war with the journalist Walter Lippmann, but did not agree to see him. A cabinet meeting scheduled for March 13 was scrubbed. On March 16, a labor crisis finally brought him back into view—prematurely, the worried Grayson said. Two days later, Wilson was horrified to learn that German submarines had just sunk three American ships. Even so, his desire to avoid all-out war did not waver. As he told Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels on March 19, he had been urged to ask Congress for a declaration of war but still hoped it would not be necessary.

Literally overnight, it would seem, he abandoned this strategy. On March 20, he polled the members of his cabinet and found every one of them to be in favor of entering the war. Armed with this vote, he announced the following morning that he was calling the new Congress into extraordinary session on April 2 for the purpose of receiving “a communication concerning grave matters of national policy.” Perhaps he was swayed by the arrival of authoritative information from abroad that unless the United States threw itself full force into the fray, the armies of the Allies were probably doomed to defeat. Perhaps the abdication on March 15 of Czar Nicholas II of Russia, at the insistence of the revolutionary Duma, made it easier for Wilson to identify the Allied cause with human freedom, now that a despotism had been removed from the partnership. Or perhaps a hidden health crisis bred a hair-trigger response to those developments.

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In the absence of descriptive data about his condition during the nine-day confinement, it cannot be shown that he had suffered a stroke. Colonel House's reference to a presidential headache in his diary on March 27 is a detail worth pondering, as is the reported statement four days later by the White House head usher, Ike Hoover, that “I never knew him to be more peevish. He's out of sorts, doesn't feel well, and has a headache.” These details suggest that his blood pressure throughout this tumultuous month may have been sky-high, but they cannot be construed as stroke related. Only one thing makes it reasonable to suspect that he spent more than a week in bed recovering from a cerebral vascular lesion: the resemblance between the shattering suddenness with which he switched his position about American involvement in the war and the startling emergence

of man-in-a-hurry impatience and intransigence in the post-stroke Wilson of 1906. Having made a strong commitment to the concept of armed ships as an alternative to full-fledged belligerency, he abruptly rejected it, without giving naval gunners a chance to demonstrate what their firepower could accomplish, and against a backdrop of deeply divided public opinion, as Wilson's premier biographer, Arthur S. Link, has made clear. Even in the face of the German marauders' destruction of those three American ships, national pro-war sentiment, says Link, was far from overwhelming.

Scheduling an address to Congress for the first week in April was another telling indication of Wilson's headlong temper. The brevity of the intervening period meant that he did not have time to win agreement on the country's objectives in the war, or to exact from the Allies desirable terms of participation, or to secure pledges about the shape of the peace to come. On the spring evening when he stepped into a car for the drive to Capitol Hill, all he had with him in the transcript of his speech were some finely tuned phrases. These were his words as he rounded into his peroration:

It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to hang in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.

“AMERICA IS PRIVILEGED
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That the final sentence was a corruption of the conclusion of Martin Luther's defiant declaration before the Diet of Worms that he would recant nothing he had said in the past (“Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me.”) was the most ironic touch of all.

After a visit to the White House in March 1918, Wilson's daughter Jessie wrote to say how comforting it had been for her to find that “his wonderful spirit” and “the power of God” were keeping him “physically fit, as well as so marvelously fit every other way.”

Once war was declared, on April 6, Wilson lightened his burden somewhat by delegating important duties to certain members of his cabinet, of whom the ablest were William McAdoo at Treasury and Secretary of War Newton P. Baker. He also relied on the administrative dynamos he had personally recruit-

ed from beyond the realm of politics, most notably Herbert Hoover, whose success in expanding American agriculture enabled the United States to meet the food needs of the Allies as well as its own, and Bernard Baruch, who turned the lackluster War Industries Board into an effective means of converting factories to essential work for the military and eliminating production bottlenecks. Every week, Wilson invited Hoover, Baruch, and the heads of all the other war agencies to the White House for a planning session, over which he presided with cheerful but relentless efficiency. In such moments, he seemed exhilarated by the cares of his office.

On the other hand, when an English diplomat called on him one day, “he looked tired, and his voice was decidedly weak,” and Edith Wilson was upset by how often he was completely done in by pain. At a time when every nerve was tense with anxiety because of the war, she remembered, and the burdens on her husband’s shoulders were “enough to crush the vitality of a giant, there would come days when he was incapacitated by blinding headaches that no medicine could relieve. He would have to give up everything, and the only cure seemed to be sleep. We would make the room cool and dark, and when at last the merciful sleep would come, he would lie for hours in this way, apparently not even breathing. Many a time I [stole] in and leaned over him to listen—to see if he were really alive.”

The sufferer also made dreadful mistakes, in which a missionary grimness or a self-damaging egotism was dismally apparent. He appalled civil libertarians, for example, by endorsing the Espionage Act, which permitted the Post Office Department and the Justice Department to close the mails to socialist and Christian publications opposed to the war; the Trading-with-the-Enemy Act, which granted the postmaster general virtually dictatorial authority over the foreign-language press; and the Sedition Act, which empowered the federal government to punish expressions of opinion about the American form of government (or the flag or military uniforms) that were deemed to be disloyal, whether or not harmful consequences could be demonstrated.

His egotism and the damage it caused him were especially evident toward the end of October 1918, when he called on the voters of the United States to return Democratic majorities to the Congress in the upcoming election, identified “my leadership” with the imminently triumphant outcome of the war, and raised doubts about the patriotism of Republican politicians. When his embittered opponents went on to win control of both houses of Congress, the most alarming of the dark prospects he had to face was that Henry Cabot Lodge would head the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.



On the morning of December 4, 1918, when Wilson boarded the troopship *George Washington* to attend the Peace Conference in Paris, he was exhausted from the preparations for the journey and contending as well with a heavy head cold and sore throat. Yet again, Cary



Grayson had reason to warn the 61-year-old president about the perils of overdoing. But there was little chance that Grayson's warning would be heeded. In another instance of his self-damaging egotism, Wilson had refused to invite along in an advisory capacity former secretary of state Elihu Root, former president William Howard Taft, or any other Republican statesman with a first-rate mind. His advisers were a generally undistinguished lot, though they included House, on whose wide-ranging intelligence Wilson had long relied, but with whom he would soon quarrel because of House's weakness of will as a negotiator. In representing the United States, Wilson would run what amounted to a one-man show. At times he even did his own typing.

The Peace Conference got down to business in mid-January 1919. Wilson's agenda rested on the Fourteen Points address and several other speeches he had



Promising to end war and guarantee national self-determination, Wilson arrived in Paris in 1919 to near universal acclaim and adulation.

given in 1918 in which he had spelled out his vision of a just peace. He believed that open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, the reduction of armaments, free trade, and self-determination as the governing principle in resolving territorial disputes were absolutely essential to the avoidance of future wars, as, above all, was the establishment of the League of Nations, an international organization that would be dedicated to the territorial integrity of nations great and small.

The four other major figures in the so-called Council of Ten (of the victorious allies) were Georges Clemenceau of France, David Lloyd George of Great Britain, Vittorio Orlando of Italy, and Baron Makino of Japan. All were shrewd

bargainers, and all represented their respective countrymen's wishes to a much greater degree than Wilson did his. That they were bound by treaties to support one another's claims further strengthened their bargaining positions, as did the brute fact that their armies occupied the territories that were in dispute. Clemenceau and Lloyd George, in particular, were formidable opponents. Clemenceau's quasi-Carthaginian objective was to maul Germany so severely that it would be unable for many decades to launch a revanchist assault on France. Lloyd George had liberal instincts and a highly intuitive intelligence but was best known for his shiftiness.

Clemenceau and Lloyd George were dazzling debaters. Even so, Wilson prevailed in the early going by dint of his courage, facility of expression, and tenacity of purpose. In the face of the British, French, and Japanese contention that all of Germany's former colonies should be given over to the powers that had conquered them, Wilson succeeded in having the colonies placed under a mandate system sponsored by a League of Nations that was still no more than a concept. He also won approval, on January 25, of a resolution making the constitutional formation of the League the Council's next order of business, despite Clemenceau's preference for the forging of a military alliance against Germany.

By common consent, Wilson took charge of the often-quarrelsome multinational commission that drafted the League's charter, which, in his Presbyterian fashion, he called the Covenant. His own ideas about constitution making were ingenious, and he was open to imaginative proposals from others. The result was that the commission voted unanimously in favor of the Covenant. From his Princeton days onward, Wilson had racked up many achievements of first-order importance. But the creation of the first globally encompassing international organization in history was by all odds the most impressive of them.

In March, things got rough. In a series of sophisticatedly argued speeches, Clemenceau demanded that two new states, Poland and Czechoslovakia, be strengthened by dismembering eastern Germany, that a Rhenish buffer state be

torn out of the flank of western Germany, and that, along with Alsace-Lorraine, the iron- and coal-rich Saar Basin be ceded to France. But the true masterpiece of the sophist's art, as John Maynard Keynes called it, was the joint British-French idea that the expenditures of the Allied governments on pensions and

separation allowances could fairly be added to the already astronomical cost of civilian damages that Germany was expected to pay in reparations. To counter these recommendations, all of which horrified him, Wilson had to do much more than claim that they violated the spirit of the Fourteen Points. Ten-hour sessions of disputation in the Council became commonplace, as did presidential evenings, extending into the small hours of the morning, spent in solitary study of maps and charts and statistics.

With every passing day, Clemenceau was becoming more openly con-

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temptuous of Wilson's pleas to treat France's fearsome enemy with leniency. In retrospect, the explosion that finally occurred seemed inevitable. Clemenceau called Wilson pro-German and stalked out of the room. The president responded on March 29 with an ineffectual confession of worry that the Peace Conference might not be able to survive much longer. Five days later, vomiting and diarrhea overcame him after lunch. "I am feeling terribly bad," he said to

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Grayson. Somehow he managed to get through the afternoon session of the Council, although there were moments when he felt he could not, owing to intense pain in his head, back, and stomach. That night, he was shaken by “asthmatic coughing,” Grayson recalled, “which broke the sleep that had always been his sheet anchor.” In addition, he found it difficult to breathe while lying flat, and his temperature rose to 103 degrees. Reading these symptoms, Grayson advised Wilson that the pandemic flu virus of 1918–19 was the cause of his misery. But to the press, predictably, the doctor explained that the president had a cold.

Lloyd George's belief that the president had also suffered a stroke is supported by the sea change that took place in Wilson's political department. On April 6, he astonished the world by announcing that he was ordering the *George Washington* to be held in readiness to take him home. In the United States, Democrats and Republicans alike criticized this display of ruthless petulance. But at the Peace Conference, the fear that Wilson might indeed depart, and that the United States might deal with Germany on its own, impelled a rethinking of Clemenceau's punitive designs. This process was not slowed by Wilson's cancellation of his order to the *George Washington*. The peace treaty that was ultimately fashioned was harsh, but without Wilson it would have been far harsher. Only with respect to reparations did he fail to struggle against extremist terms. His surrender on that issue made him seem weak, but it was, in fact, another expression of his ruthlessness: Amid the dark realities of postwar Europe, the Covenant of the League of Nations represented a glowing promise, and to sustain it Wilson was prepared to do whatever was required.

In his final two and a half months in Paris, heart problems and paranoia were new tortures for Wilson. The former he was able to conceal; the latter he could not. It became apparent from his strange behavior in the presence of the waiters, porters, and cleaning women who served him and his wife that he believed them to be secret agents who understood English perfectly, although they pretended not to, and were conveying the contents of overheard conversations and surreptitiously perused letters to spymasters in the French government. Visibly alarmed by a further suspicion that American embassy personnel were making use of official limousines for their private convenience, he issued a stern order to halt this (nonexistent) practice. His mistaken notion that some of the chairs and tables in the palace where he and Edith were living had been spirited away and sold illicitly was soon reflected in an order to members of his staff to undertake an

inventory of all the palace's furnishings. "Coming from the President," Ike Hoover later commented, "these were funny things, and we could not but surmise that something queer was happening in his mind."

The pale, depleted president who addressed the Senate of the United States on July 10, 1919, did not come to seek approval of the Treaty of Peace and its attendant Covenant, which he had signed the previous month in the glittering Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. He was there to make Senate ratification seem a foregone conclusion. Although marred by a stumbling delivery, his presentation smacked of a divinely sanctioned instruction. "The stage is set, the destiny disclosed," he sonorously affirmed at the close. "It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way. We cannot turn back. We can only go forward, with lifted eyes and fresh spirit, to follow the vision. It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way. The light streams upon the path ahead, and nowhere else."

But compromise was a necessity if the United States was to join the League of Nations. Of the 49 Republican senators, 14 were irreconcilably opposed to American membership; 23 were prepared to accept the idea if strong reservations formulated by Senator Lodge were incorporated into the Covenant, and the remaining 12 wanted nothing much more than moderate revisions in the wording of certain passages. Of the 47 Democrats, 43 were solidly pro-League. The arithmetic was inescapable. Even if Wilson made a sufficient number of concessions to the "mild reservationists" to win them over, he would still fall short of the two-thirds vote needed for ratification. Senator James Watson of Indiana, a Republican, did not beat around the bush with Wilson: "Mr. President, you are licked. There is only one way you can take the United States into the League of Nations." "Which way is that?" "Accept it with the Lodge reservations." The president's eyes blazed. "Lodge reservations? Never! I'll never consent to any policy with which that impossible name is so prominently identified."

There was nothing about Lodge that the Wilson of mid-1919 did not detest with a maniacal intensity. For his part, Lodge thought Wilson untrustworthy, regarded his rejection of balance-of-power internationalism as naive, and feared that, if success as an architect of peace were added to his wartime accomplishments, he might run for a third term in 1920—and win. Humiliation of the president was Lodge's goal, and to that end he loaded the Foreign Relations Committee with die-hard opponents of the League. At a White House meeting between the president and the committee, Lodge saw to it that searching questions were asked, and he could not have been more delighted when the ineffectual answers revealed that his quarry was suffering from cognitive loss and memory impairment. For these two antagonists, an amicable settlement of their differences about the League was simply not in the cards.

So Wilson sought an alternative course. He declared his intention to "appeal to the country." Face to face with the electorate, he would fire up an enthusiasm that would carry the cause of righteousness to victory—even though, as a Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee sardonically reminded him, the people could not vote on the issue before the Senate did. What's

more, going over the heads of prerogative-conscious senators was apt to prove counterproductive.

In the privacy of the White House residential quarters, Wilson had talked about his plans for some weeks before they were formally announced, and Edith was profoundly distressed by them. “The increasing toll on my husband’s body and brain” had already stirred fears in her that she shuddered to specify. His energy level moved between brief highs and longer lows; his headaches were ghastly, his heart was no longer sound, and occasionally he experienced double vision. Grayson, too, was upset by the president’s expansive descriptions of his itinerary and had several serious talks with him about the heat, discomfort, and stress of a month-long train trip up, down, and across the country. But not even the small stroke he suffered during a weekend cruise down the Potomac on the presidential yacht could deter Wilson.

The travel-wise journalist H. H. Kohlsaet took in how weak and unwell Wilson seemed and warned that “you are too ill to take that long trip. The heat will be intense in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska. You will break down before you reach the Rockies.” The president’s hands were trembling as he replied, “I don’t care if I die the next minute after the treaty is signed.” With time running out, Grayson came to see him again to make a final appeal for prudence, but Wilson cut him off. “You must remember that I, as Commander in Chief, was responsible for sending our soldiers to Europe. In the crucial test of the trenches, they did not turn back—and I cannot turn back now. I cannot put my personal safety, my health, in the balance against my duty. I must go.”

Only his weakening grasp of reality kept the president from realizing how many other duties he *had* shirked. In the face of the bloody race riots and lynchings that shamed the land in that first summer of peace, for instance, he not only failed to remind white America that a third of a million black men had served their country in the war but clung to his deplorable policy of reducing the employment of blacks in government positions in Washington simply because of their skin color.

Had he died in action somewhere in the West, he would have redeemed his fraying reputation as president, enveloped the League in the glow of his martyrdom, and fulfilled his ardent wish to be identified with the heroes he had sent to their deaths in France. But the departure of the presidential train from Union Station in Washington on the evening of September 2, 1919, marked the beginning of a quite different scenario.

To the reporters who accompanied him, the president seemed to be enjoying himself, and they continued to think so for some time. Despite a daily schedule that called for at least one major speech and close to a dozen rear-platform appearances—waving and smiling at the crowds and shaking uncountable numbers of hands—he appeared each morning looking refreshed and vigorous, in seeming proof of the impression Grayson was creating about him in his daily bulletins. But in fact he was slowly falling apart, and Grayson and Edith knew it. At night, asthmatic coughing and difficulty in breathing forced him to sleep—or try to sleep—propped up with pillows in a chair. On the long haul through



Wilson's political nemesis, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, blocked ratification of the Treaty of Versailles when Wilson barred modifications, keeping America out of the League of Nations.

stifling heat between Minneapolis-St. Paul and the Pacific Northwest, he suffered cardiac failure and splitting headaches. By the time the train reached Seattle, Grayson noted in his diary, "his exertions were sapping his vitality very fast." Industrial Workers of the World leader Jack Kipps, a member of a small delegation that met with Wilson in private to argue for the release of imprisoned radicals, offered a more vividly detailed judgment: The president's head seemed heavy on his neck, "and he looked old—just old." Furthermore, one of his hands shook so badly that he had to grip the lapel of his coat to steady it, and for a few moments he closed his eyes as though he had a terrible headache.

Inspired by the huge crowds and the ovations that greeted him in California, Wilson gave some memorable speeches. Unfortunately, he was running on empty. On the return leg of the journey, in Pueblo, Colorado, on the evening of September 25, a blood clot formed in an artery of his brain but did not rupture. The pain, he gaspingly confessed to his wife, was unbearable. Through the night, he sat upright in a chair, while his wife and his doctor kept a vigil beside him. Around five in the morning, he fell asleep. "As I sat there watching," Edith Wilson would relate, "I felt that something had broken inside me; and from that hour on I would wear a mask—not only to the public but to the one I loved best in the world; for he must never know how ill he was, and I must carry on."

Although Edith did not care for Joe Tumulty, he was a true-blue Wilson loyalist, and she had no compunction about enlisting him as an enabler of the cover-up that she and her co-conspirator, Grayson, were already mounting. When the train reached its next scheduled stop, in Wichita, Kansas, on the morning of September 26, Tumulty appeared on the station platform and read a brief statement: “The President has . . . so spent himself without reserve on this trip that it has brought a nervous reaction in his digestive organs. Dr. Grayson, therefore, insists upon the cancellation of his remaining appointments and his immediate return to Washington.”

In the 1870s, Wilson the gifted Princeton undergraduate had depicted his political model, Pitt the Elder, rising to answer a foe and then falling, never to rise again. On Thursday, October 2, 1919, four days after the Wilsons’ return to the White House, Edith went to her husband’s bedroom and found him unconscious on the floor of the adjacent bathroom, next to the toilet. Bloody cuts on his temple and nose indicated that he had fallen off the toilet and hit his

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head on the bathtub. With Grayson’s help, Edith carried him to his bed (where he would lie immobilized for four weeks). Grayson immediately examined him. Ten minutes later, he emerged from the bedroom and announced that the president’s left side was paralyzed. Further observations revealed that he had lost vision in the left-half fields of both eyes, that his breathing was labored, and that his voice had lost its timbre. Only gradually would it become apparent that his judgment, which may already have been somewhat impaired, had also sustained serious damage.

On the morning of October 3, *The Washington Post* asserted in a naively unquestioning story that the president’s sudden illness had been diagnosed as “nervous exhaustion.” But in the White House that morning the atmosphere was grim, and in the Cabinet Room, where Tumulty was meeting with Secretary of State Robert Lansing, it was also frosty. In expressionless tones, Lansing read the president’s secretary a passage from Article II, Section 1, of the Constitution: “In Case of the Removal of the President from Office, or of his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office, the same shall devolve on the Vice President.” Tumulty challengingly asked who should certify that the president was disabled. Lansing told him that the president’s physician possessed the power to do so, as did Tumulty himself. “You may rest assured,” Tumulty coldly replied, “that while Woodrow Wilson is lying in the White House on the broad of his back I will not be a party to ousting him. He has been too wonderful to me to receive such treatment at my hands.”

On seeing that Grayson had entered the room, Tumulty turned to him for reinforcement of his defiance. “And I am sure that Dr. Grayson will never certify his disability. Will you, Grayson?” The physician affirmed that indeed

he would not. Whereupon Tumulty added that, if anybody outside the White House circle were to submit such a certification, he and Grayson would repudiate it. Over the weekend, upbeat stories, patently inspired by Grayson, appeared in the press. Nevertheless, Lansing convoked a meeting of the cabinet on Monday morning to discuss the means by which the vice president, Thomas R. Marshall, might temporarily assume executive authority. But Grayson, whom one of the cabinet members had invited to be present, thwarted Lansing's intentions by announcing that the president's health had "showed decided improvement and seemed to indicate a speedy recovery." Choking back his frustration, Lansing then asked Grayson to convey to the president "our felicitations and best wishes."

On October 11, newspapers nationwide carried prominent stories about a letter that Senator George Moses, a New Hampshire Republican, had sent to his constituents, one of whom had seen fit to share it with the wire services. "Of course he may get well—that is, he may live," Moses had said of the president, "but if he does he will not be any material force or factor in anything." By this time, too, news and editorial writers were asking questions about the unexplained comings and goings of medical specialists at the White House and about the absence of a statement from the president about anything. Rumors spread from coast to coast that Wilson was insane or suffering from syphilis, and a joke that portrayed him as running naked through the White House was only one of many humorous putdowns of this proud man.

Edith insisted that the cover-up must continue, and her word was law. When a urinary blockage, accompanied by high fever and the possibility of urinary poisoning, further endangered her husband's life, the doctors she called in recommended prostate surgery. But she would not hear of it, and finally the blockage eased of its own accord. In a further demonstration of her authority, she turned down the requests of influential congressional Democrats that they be allowed to visit their stricken leader, and whenever a cabinet member or congressman sent him a letter about a pressing problem, she alone decided whether he should be burdened by its contents. "The decision that was mine," she later affirmed, "was what was important and what was not."

Somehow, Tumulty persuaded Edith that Vice President Marshall should be made aware of the president's condition and that the facts should be conveyed to him unofficially by someone not on the White House staff. J. Fred Essary, a *Baltimore Sun* reporter, was selected. In a meeting in Marshall's office, Essary informed the vice president that the president was in dire straits and that he should be prepared to take over at any moment. Marshall was a genial little man, a self-styled Hoosier philosopher, who dearly loved earning fees on the lecture circuit, was best known for saying that "what this country needs is a really good five-cent cigar," and confessed that he liked being vice president because the position had no responsibilities. He was evidently appalled and frightened by Essary's message, and he did not say a word when the newspaperman finished speaking and stood up to go. At the door, Essary looked back, but Marshall, as if in a trance, was staring fixedly at his hands.



A gaunt-looking President Wilson rode through Washington with his second wife, Edith, in 1920.

Well into early November, bills became law without Wilson's signature. A message vetoing the Volstead Act, with its stipulations of procedures for enforcing Prohibition, had to be put together by Tumulty. The bedridden president then signed it with such an unsteady hand as to convince some of the senators who closely examined his scrawl that it was a forgery. The worst example of Wilson's suspended animation was his lack of resistance to the plans of the Justice Department. Riding high on the frenzy of the Red Scare, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer carried out, on November 7, the first of the notorious raids that by the end of the year would have his men rounding up alleged communist aliens by the thousands to institute deportation procedures against them.

In all likelihood, Wilson was not informed of the grisly details of these events, and would not have cared about them in any case. What counted, supremely, in his monomaniacal mind was the ratification of the peace treaty. In a speech on the Senate floor, Lodge presented a resolution that incorporated his reservations about the Covenant. Though he had enough votes to get the

resolution approved, he lacked the two-thirds majority that approval of the treaty required. The Democratic leader, Senator Gilbert Hitchcock, felt that the time had come for a surrender to Lodge on his reservations in order to gain the larger prize of American membership in the League. In a letter to Wilson, he asked

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whether this deal was agreeable to him. No answer was forthcoming, so he sent a second letter, to which Edith Wilson replied. The president, she said, could not accept ratification with the Lodge amendments attached. On November 17, the still-hopeful Hitchcock was allowed to make an appeal to Wilson in person. To his amazement, the senator found “an emaciated old man with a thin white beard” sit-

ting in a wheelchair. On hearing that the treaty could not be ratified without reservations, the president “fairly groaned.” “Is it possible? Is it possible?” he croaked in a strange voice.

At Wilson’s direction, Hitchcock prepared a letter to the Senate Democrats, declaring that the Lodge reservations constituted a “nullification” of the treaty. Once the letter was typed up, the president’s name, in purple ink, was affixed to it with a rubber stamp. Not long thereafter, the Lodge resolutions, opposed by Democrats loyal to Wilson and by isolationist irreconcilables, lost by a vote of 39 to 55. A subsequent motion to approve the treaty without any reservations was opposed by the Lodge Republicans and the irreconcilables and went down to defeat 38 to 53. Thanks to a sick old man, doubly cut off from reality by his damaged judgment and his wife’s determination to shield him from hard facts, the Senate had rejected the treaty.

As one of the irreconcilables, Senator Albert B. Fall of New Mexico was delighted with the outcome of the League battle. Even so, this future figure in the scandals that would beset the administration of President Warren Harding could not stand the thought that the United States now had what he called a petticoat government. Putting an end to this intolerable situation became his *idée fixe*. He and Senator Hitchcock sought a meeting with Wilson, ostensibly to discuss a political crisis in Mexico, and Edith granted the senators access. She was confident that by rehearsing the scene with the president and by carefully arranging the lights and the furniture in his bedroom, she could make Fall’s investigatory zeal look foolish. At 2:30 P.M. on December 4, the senators entered the room, where low lights cast a soft glow. The president was propped up in bed, and blankets concealed his paralyzed left arm. On a table close to his right hand—his good hand—lay a report on the Mexican situation from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Dr. Grayson and the first lady were standing by. Because she was holding, as planned, a pad of paper and a pencil, she avoided having to shake hands with Fall. But Wilson himself, to Fall’s astonishment, gave him a vigorous handshake, and wisecracked, “Well,

Senator, how are your Mexican investments getting along?”

Edith began writing down everything that was said, along with her impressions of Fall. In her jaundiced view, he looked like a regular Uriah Heep, “washing his hands with invisible soap in imperceptible water.” Fall noticed how furiously she was writing. “You seem very much engaged, madam,” he remarked. “I thought it wise to record this interview so there may be no misunderstandings,” she explained. Fall asked the president whether he had had a chance to read the report of the Foreign Relations Committee. “I have a copy right here,” he answered, reaching over and picking it up from the table. In a stern voice, Fall launched into a lengthy monologue about an American consular agent imprisoned in Mexico. As he was speaking, Grayson, who had left the room several minutes earlier, returned. With a consciously dramatic flair, he announced that word of the consular agent’s release from jail had just been received. Recognizing the defeat of his malign intentions, Fall got up to go and took Wilson’s hand: “Well, Mr. President, we have all been praying for you.” The reply was merciless: “Which way, Senator?”

Outside the White House, a hundred reporters awaited Fall’s impressions. “The president was sitting up in bed,” he began, “wearing a dark brown sweater. His color was good. He was clean-shaven. I understand he now shaves himself. He seemed to me to be in excellent trim, both mentally and physically.” *The New York Times* reported the following morning that this judgment was thought by all who heard it to silence for good “the many wild and often unfriendly rumors of presidential disability.”

Two weeks later, Wilson concocted a scheme to bring the League issue before the voters. With Tumulty’s help, he drafted an open letter to the American people that challenged approximately two dozen senators opposed to the League to resign their seats at once and run for them again in specially called elections. If the majority won reelection, he and the vice president would resign. But if the majority did not survive, he would consider the outcome “a great and solemn referendum,” in which an unmodified conception of American membership in the League had been endorsed. Fortunately, this cockeyed letter was never released.

But elements of it were included in the letter Wilson dispatched to Jackson Day dinners of the Democratic faithful in January 1920. Although it was clear that most voters who were for the League preferred the version with the Lodge reservations, Wilson asserted that the vast majority favored his version. And proof of this, he further insisted, could be obtained by turning the presidential election of 1920 into a great and solemn referendum on the question. Thus did he attempt to bind his party to a losing proposition. Incredibly enough, he even hinted that the party could make victory in November doubly certain by placing him at the head of the ticket. He was walking now, with the aid of a cane.

“MR. PRESIDENT, WE HAVE
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THE REPLY WAS MERCILESS:
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Why should he not run for president?

His crazy comeback dreams were a comfort to him, but his paranoid suspicions, uncontrollable anger, and periods of depression put him through an emotional wringer and created problems for others. The British and French governments were stunned by his insultingly hostile reaction to their proposed alterations of the peace treaty's unfavorable settlement of Italy's claims to Fiume. The distinguished British ambassador, Lord Grey, was, in effect, declared *persona non grata* at the White House after he refused to send home a member of his staff who had reportedly made slighting remarks about Mrs. Wilson. Egged on by Edith's enduring indignation, Wilson wrote Secretary Lansing a letter demanding to know whether he had held cabinet meetings on his own initiative the previous fall. Upon receiving Lansing's admission that of course he had, Wilson forced him to submit his resignation. At which point *The Los Angeles Times* published insinuations of mental illness in the Oval Office.

What Wilson did to his beloved League of Nations raised the most disturbing questions of all about his sanity. After a series of arduous conferences, the League's subtlest advocates in the Senate worked out a compromise that they believed would be acceptable to two-thirds of their colleagues. Wilson, alas, informed his most dutiful senatorial supporters that the compromise was offensive to him, and, on March 19, 1920, 23 of them cast their votes accordingly. These expressions of blind devotion to the president, in combination with the votes of 12 irreconcilables, sufficed to prevent the treaty's adoption, and Senator Lodge gloatingly proclaimed that the League was "as dead as Marley's ghost." The defection of only seven Wilson loyalists would have put the United States in the League, but never again would the Senate vote on the issue.

When the Democratic candidate, James M. Cox, lost the presidential election that fall to Republican Warren G. Harding, Wilson reacted with surprising tranquility. He felt no resentment, he told associates. Some days later, an announcement that the League of Nations would soon hold its first meeting in Geneva put the taste of bile back in his mouth. So bitter was he about the "other great powers . . . now mismanaging the world" that he ruled against sending an American observer to the meeting. The times were sickeningly out of joint, and in his disease-ravaged judgment there was no use pretending otherwise.

On Armistice Day 1923, less than three months before his death, he appeared in the doorway of his house on S Street in Washington to address the hundreds of well-wishers who had come to pay tribute to him. His voice was so weak that it was difficult to catch his words, and at a couple of points he broke down and wept. At the last moment, though, after he had seemingly completed his remarks and was starting to turn away, he suddenly spoke again. "Just one word more," he said, in a semblance of the commanding tones of years gone by. "I cannot refrain from saying it. I am not one of those who have the least anxiety about the triumph of the principles I have stood for. I have seen fools resist Providence before, and I have seen their destruction, as will come upon them again, utter destruction and contempt. That we shall prevail is as sure as that God reigns." □